“Music is an important and extremely useful tool in the way we learn and to deny its power is a waste of a truly wonderful resource” (Kristian David Olson). Though some would look at music as a small footnote in the progression of humanity, it is in fact a much greater force; for some, it defines their very existence. The fact is, music is a driving force in society; it has been present since the dawn of man. The average person spends several hours a day listening to music, whether they see it as a main activity or just as something to take up space in the background. It is not surprising, then, that music has a great effect on how humans think and act, possibly even affecting intelligence. Several studies have been conducted on this theory; though some results are questionable, the consensus view seems to be that music has the capacity for both positive and negative effects.

As a background activity, listening to music has been shown to positively affect mood, productivity, and even intelligence. As stated on the Reverse Spins website: “simply listening to music in the background while doing an arduous task can make it seem much easier, or in some cases [...] ease the strain of an activity” (Olson). Whether it is merely a distraction from the stress of a situation or genuinely lifts the mood of the listener, music has been shown in several studies to increase productivity in this manner. In both cases, the listener often finishes the activity in a shorter period of time and with less residual stress. If implemented into the classroom or workplace, this effect could improve test scores nationwide and increase productivity of the working class. Besides improving mood, listening to music has even been shown to encourage intellectual growth, particularly among children. It has been widely observed that “children, teens, and even babies potentially benefit from listening to music, as music can be a stimulant to intellectual and cognitive development” (“Psychology of Music”). It is a possibility that this intellectual growth may sprout from the extra motivation that music grants (as mentioned earlier), providing room for further exploration and growth. It is also possible that the mental activity of memorization and counting beats may spur brain development; however, these effects would be minimal in the average listener. Whatever the actual causes of this effect, it seems that a more productive and intelligent society may develop within a musical environment.

Though the effects of merely listening to music are somewhat significant, the effects of musical education are even greater. Many experts agree that “with music lessons, because there are so many different facets involved, such as memorizing, expressing emotion, and learning about musical interval and chords, the multidimensional nature of the experience may be motivating to the IQ effect” (“Effect of Music on Children’s Intelligence”). A child taking music lessons greatly improves their comprehension of proportional math, which is of great importance in higher level mathematics. Besides the more obvious mathematical effect, the child will explore the lyrical rhythm and content of the music; understanding the vocabulary and rhythm of the musical language may allow them to improve both their reading and writing skills. So, in effect, an education in music will aid the child in what are considered by many to be the two most important and fundamental areas of study. On this same note, concerning failing students, music education has been shown to pull children from even the greatest depths of academic failure. As Olson says, “music can be one of the most influential factors in getting at-risk students motivated” (Olson). With a step outside of the normal, standardized educational system, the failing student may be able to see music as inspiration to do well in other areas of life. Through music, the student may now be able to express thought and emotion, make bonds with other musicians, and feel the need for self-improvement. With these types of changes, the student will seek improvement both consciously and unconsciously in the classroom and in other areas of life. Through the observations and in-depth studies presented, it seems
that the implementation of music education into the school system could solve many of the problems that test preparation classes and overbearing focus on core areas of education can not.

Despite the advantages music may offer to students, there is a possibility that music may also have negative effects upon impressionable young minds. The Suite 101 website, exploring both the positive and negative effects music can have, had this to say: “Certain types of music or more specifically, [music with] violent lyrics, are believed to have a negative impact on adolescents” (“Effects of Music on Children and Adolescents”). With the experience of music being so close to the human psyche, the listener naturally experiences both emotional highs and lows. While most would feel nothing more than a relieving cathartic effect, in some cases troubled adolescents have been pushed over the edge while listening to music, or encouraged in their self-destructive habits. Many documented suicides have taken place while music played in the background, and there is some speculation that extended listening could lead to anti-social behavior. However, cases of this are few and far between; often it seems that the subject was previously troubled, before music could have been pinned as the primary cause. In other words, music is not really the cause of the problem, though it clearly affects the mind and actions of the troubled adolescent.

Furthermore, sexual promiscuity and excessive profanity in modern music (hip hop is specifically mentioned) have also been said to affect the young psyche. Again quoting from the Suite 101 website: “Sexually explicit lyrics and mounds of profanity exuberate through certain hip hop songs [which] can have a negative effect on the thoughts and feelings of adolescents” (“Effects of Music on Children and Adolescents”). Though there is no well publicized study as to the truth of this theory, mere observation might be evidence enough. To the casual observer, it may seem clear that both music and society as a whole have become more promiscuous as time passes. The prominent theory is that the explicit nature of some modern music has desensitized today’s youth to immoral thoughts and actions. Though not studied extensively, there is clearly a correlation between the subject matter of music and the actions of the listener; therefore, this theory cannot be entirely dismissed.

Using the resources provided and careful observation, it is clear that music is a powerful force in human society. Listening to certain music has been shown to improve mood, increase productivity, and even encourage intellectual growth, while music education can have an even greater effect. On the negative side, there are also correlations between promiscuous or violent music and destructive behavior; though some of these correlations can be attributed to a previously troubled youth, others are not so easy to dismiss. However wonderful or terrible it may be, music is a cornerstone of human culture; it is a learning tool, a method of communication, and, for some, a way of life. As such, it should be treated with respect.

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